Lord Bishop William Piercy Austin (1807 - 1892) of British Guiana

By Dmitri Allicock

"Anoint and cheer our soiled face with the abundance of His grace"
- Dr. William Piercy Austin, August 4 1847

Honoring our heritage must be as natural as breathing for it is indeed the foundation on which you stand. Many great individuals of early British Guiana have been lost to the fog of history but the legacy of Anglican Bishop Dr. William Piercy lives on in Guyana. Bishop William Piercy Austin’s ideas and diligent contributions gave rise to the academic pursuits in Guyana for which he is recognized as one of the most outstanding individual in the history of the Colony of British Guiana.

William Piercy Austin was born at a small inn in Stone, Stafford, England, on the November 7, 1807. He was a son of William Austin {1759-1817} and Mehetabel Piercy {1782-1852} of Plantation Land of Plenty, in Essequibo, and in his youth spent some years in the colony. He was educated at Hyde Abbey School, near Winchester, from whence he proceeded to Exeter College, Oxford.

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When at Oxford he was a “wet bob” and formed an interest in boat rowing which he always maintained throughout his life on the rivers and creeks of Guyana. He took his degree in 1830, was ordained a deacon in 1831 and admitted to the priesthood by the Bishop of Bath and Wells in 1833. Visiting his paternal estates in Guiana, he was persuaded by Bishop Coleridge of Barbados and accepted the position of Rural Dean of Essequibo, a post in which he was succeeded by his cousin Rev. William, Austin {August 27, 1799-May 17, 1884}, who remained there as Dean for most of his long life, becoming known as “The old Dean” whose rectory was in Suddie, capital of the county, where he constructed St. John’s Church.

Bishop William Piercy Austin was consecrated in Westminster Abbey before he was 35 years old and it is recorded that when he kissed hands of his appointment, the youthful Queen Victoria, declared that he was the youngest and handsomest bishop in her dominions. He was indeed a handsome man, standing six feet two inches in his stockings, with broad shoulders, surmounted by a noble head, fine face with amiable smile, it was said.

He was married in the county of Perthshire, Scotland, to Eliza Piercy Henderson in February 1831 and had children, Eliza Austin {1832-1832}, Rev. William George Gardiner Austin {1835-1904}, Eliza Arabella Austin {1837-1884}, Charles Piercy Austin {1839-1892}, Mehetabel Wickham Austin {1841-1867} John Coleridge Austin {1844-1850}, Mary Lochart Austin {1845-1870}, Charlotte Bruce Austin {1849-1942} and Frederick Coleridge Moore Austin {1850-1851}. All of the children except for Mehetabel and Frederick were listed as born in British Guiana.

Kingston House, the Bishop’s residence in Georgetown, is now called Austin House in his memory-{above illustration}

In 1837, he was made Archdeacon of Demerara and 1842, and the inaugural Bishop of British Guiana. For 50 years he ruled over the Church of British Guiana with firmness, tact and good temper. He had no extreme opinions, tolerated all varieties of ritual amongst his clergy, so long as he found them hardworking men. Several months in every year were spent in most arduous and wearisome journeys up the vast rivers and forest of the interior.
Nothing daunted him. Camping out at night after night in the damp bush, shooting dangerous rapids, spending long hours with his long legs cramped up in corials were mere pastimes to him. He always in robust health, excellent spirits, loved his work and respected by all men.

On Wednesday, August 4, 1847 a Charge was delivered by Bishop Austin, “It has usually been the custom of the Church, and, indeed, such is still the practice in settled dioceses, to assemble the Clergy at triennial Visitations; but engaged as we are in a missionary field, I have considered it to be for your own benefit and convenience, and I believe it has been attended with no detriment to the Church, that I should not call you from your separate fields of labor without an urgent necessity. The time has now arrived, however, when I could no longer delay our assembling together; and my prayers have been offered up, I doubt not in unison with your own, that the present occasion may be one of mutual edification, comfort, and support. It may be permitted me to remind my Reverend Brethren of the readiness with which I have always associated myself with them in their various labors, and of the constant personal intercourse which I have hitherto maintained with themselves and flocks committed to their charge…”

Bishop William Piercy Austin’s contributions to Guyana include the prestigious Queen’s College, established in 1844 as the Queen's College Grammar School for boys. Perhaps, as high as seventy percent of males who occupied positions of consequence in the twentieth century in Guyana and particularly after the Second World War are graduates of Queen's College including former President Forbes Burnham and Cheddi Jagan. {Illustration- Queen’s College 1942}

The first assembly was held on August 5, 1844 with an enrollment of fifteen boys. Although the school started out as an Anglican Church School, Bishop Austin was interested in making it a more broad-based institution to include non-Anglicans. Its first administration, however, consisted only of members of the Church of England. Formal classes commenced on August 15, 1844 in the Old Colony House (situated in the compound of what is now the Guyana High Courts, previously known as the Victoria Law Courts). The original fifteen students had two tutors, with Bishop Austin himself becoming the first Principal. In 1845 the school moved to Main and Quamina (then Murray) Streets.
Its population was rapidly expanding and, with a student body of seventy and three tutors, another move was made in 1854 to its first formal building at Carmichael and Quamina Streets.

In 1876, the school became a colonial institution and was renamed Queen's College. Several additional changes in location took the school to the site of the present Ministry of Health building (Vlissengen Road and Brickdam) in 1918, and then to its present location in Thomas Lands (Camp and Thomas Roads), where the facilities were formally opened on 3 December 1951. The school became co-educational in 1975. This was accomplished by transferring approximately one hundred and fifty girls into the 2nd, 3rd, Upper 5th and Lower 6th forms from the Bishops' High School, which institution was also a single-sex institution. Girls were also admitted into the first form.

The Bishop established **Bishop's College** for the Training of Teachers in 1851 in Charlestown. Bishop College began as a theological Seminary. The institution functioned as a Training College for teachers. It was last used in the nineteen century as a Girl Reformatory. The graduates of the Bishop's College were in the forefront of the charge and the academic excellence for well over seventy years. Daniel Edgar Sharples (1852-1921), and Samuel Augustus Campbell (1852-1931), are noted as two of the most outstanding primary school teachers in the annals of British Guiana. Tappin Johnson Elliott (1856-1938) Joseph Alfred Parkinson (1856-1945), Andrew Benjamin Brown (1857-1939), Tidman Abrahams, Hubert Boston, McLean Ogle, and Samuel Whitney Ogle, others are among the outstanding Schoolmasters of British Guiana who were graduates of the Bishop's College.

The Graduates also played vital roles in the establishment of the British Guiana Teachers' Association and the development of political agitation and advocacy among and on the behalf of the working people of British Guiana.

**Bishops' High School**, the female equivalent of Queens College, ranked as one of best secondary schools in Georgetown, Guyana was established in 1870 also by the **Anglican Church** as a ladies' school. The school later merged with Mrs. Vyfhuis' school, also founded in 1870, and then with the DeSaffon school. Mrs. Vyfhuis was offered headship of the combined schools in 1875. The school's first home was at Brickdam and Manget Place, and then at "Minto House" on Waterloo Street. It later moved to "Lamaha House" at Carmichael and Lamaha Streets, the property of Bishop E.A. Parry.
In 1907, Bishop E.A. Parry moved the school to "Woodside House" (now known as "Transport House") on Main Street, and it became known as "Woodside House School". In 1921 the school moved to its present location at Carmichael and Murray (now known as Quamina) Streets. In 1922 Bishop E.A. Parry retired and the school then became known as "The Bishops' High School". Bishop Parry died in 1936 and the "Oswald Parry Hall" was opened at the school.

In January 1936, the school was handed over to the government of British Guiana. The new building was opened on January 5, 1946. The school celebrated its centennial in 1970 and became a co-educational institution five years later, in 1975.

Bishop Austin seldom left his diocese but he attended two Pan-Anglican Synods in England, where he was treated with marked respect by the Archdeacon and bishops of the Anglican Church. When the West Indies and British Guiana were made in 1888, into Provincial Synod, he was chosen as their Primate.

On his visit to England in 1888 at his second Pan Anglican Synod, the University of Cambridge honored him and themselves by creating an LL.D of the University, on which occasion the Public Orator described him as the “Nestor of the English Church.” A year later the Queen appointed him to be Prelate of the most distinguished Prelate of the Order of St Michael and St George.
In August, 1892, the new and now historical St George’s Cathedral was approaching its completion and the venerable prelate William Piercy Austin, who was then in failing health, was anxious to open it before he obtained the rest which he had so nobly earned.

It remembered as the most touching sight when, the first part of the service being over, the Bishop was seen entering the western door of the cathedral, in full canonicals, with the collar of his order round his neck, and leaning on his son, the Rev. W.G.G. Austin, and his chaplain, the Rev. Walter Heard, who supported his arms as he came up the aisle slowly. When the vast congregation saw him, sobs burst forth on all sides, tears were rolling down the cheeks of most people as many wept aloud.

Slowly and with great difficulties, the bishop reached his episcopal chair, placed on a dais in the middle of the church, his medical attendant taking his place behind him, while the chaplain held the pastoral staff by his side, and then the Rev. W.G.G Austin read his father’s sermon, which he was unable to deliver himself.

It was a most touching address. “Little children, love another,” was the text. The short sermon was ended and then the bishop was assisted out of his chair and supported on both sides as before, he grasp his pastoral staff in one hand and raising the other into the air, blessed the congregation in trembling tones,
using up the last of nature left to him, quite audible through the great building, he poured forth the solemn words of Liturgy.

As he ended his last public words, there was dead stillness, broken only by the stifled sobs of the congregation. Bishop William Piercy Austin died on the November 9, 1892 at the age of 85 and was laid to rest at St James -The Less, in Kitty, Georgetown.

So concluded the life of one of the most outstanding and influential man in the annals of historical Guyana whose tremendous contributions to academic excellence and improvements of life are dearly cherished.